

# Improving practice learning: Eliminating delays in practice placement

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**Summary:** Undertaking practice placements (fieldwork instruction, agency-based practice learning) is an integral part of professional social work education and training across the United Kingdom. Scottish universities and partner social work service providers have however experienced long term challenges in an effort to ensure that an adequate number of practice placements were available to meet the student demand. Particularly well documented are the problems associated with a shortfall in the number of active practice teachers (fieldwork educators and practice learning facilitators) and agency settings willing to take a student.

Less is known however about the impact of a shortfall of practice placements has on social work students themselves. This article outlines the findings of a survey, involving 164 social work Students, which explores the personal impact of a delayed start to a practice placement and describes one University's attempt to eliminate these negative consequences for students by implementing new approaches to the organisation and delivery of practice learning.

**Keywords:** social work education; practice placement; practice teacher; field education; practice learning

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## Background

In Scotland, as in other areas in the United Kingdom, problems associated with an inadequate supply of practice placements (agency based practice learning / fieldwork instruction) are very familiar and well documented. (Bruce et al., 2004; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002; Henery, 2001)

In August 2003 the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE) commissioned Scottish universities providing professional social work education programmes to investigate a number of key areas in preparation for the implementation of a new four year honours degree programme in September 2005. Work on one of the key areas, Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP), was undertaken at The Robert Gordon University (RGU), Aberdeen. This project involved the development of a new approach to practice placements (agency based practice learning) that would provide university programme providers with possible solutions to the historical problems associated with an inadequate supply of practice placement opportunities, such as a lack of collaboration and communication between universities and social work agencies, the lack of senior management involvement in practice learning, work load pressures of agency staff, a lack of workload relief for those engaged in practice learning, and the number of practice teachers who are no longer engaged in practice learning activities. (Bruce et al., 2004)

A significant part of the new honours degree programme is the professional requirement for social work students to experience additional time in 'practice learning' activities during their professional training, 200 days in total, an increase of 60 days per student from the previous professional Diploma in Social Work programmes. The development of new approaches to the organisation and delivery of practice placements was seen to be a crucial factor for university programme providers and their agency partners if this increase in demand for 'practice' opportunities was to be achieved.

A systematic review of current UK and international literature was undertaken to inform the design of the new approach developed by the LEEP Project. This literature review provided a wide range of evidence that presented a comprehensive picture of the university, agency and practice teacher (fieldwork supervisor) perspectives. (Bruce et al., 2004). This literature review however also highlighted some of the

consequences faced by students when practice placements are delayed due to a lack of an adequate supply of practice teachers. Burgess (1998, p.10) argued that students felt they could not turn down a placement offer and reported that academic staff had been reluctant to listen to students' concerns in case they 'jeopardised the placement as a resource'. Henery (2001, p.35) supported this view, reporting that students felt they had 'little choice' of where they might go if there was a delay to the placement start date.

The survey carried out by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2002) suggested the lack of practice teaching resources led to students taking offers of placements at a distance from home, resulting in an inability to continue with part time employment. Financial and personal consequences were also highlighted as potential problems for students by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC, 2003). The survey carried out by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2002) also indicated that 25% of Scottish students had experienced a delay to the start of their practice placement during academic session 2001/2002, a figure supported by SSSC (2003).

While developing the four new honours degree programmes at The Robert Gordon University, the recommendations of the LEEP Project were to be influential when new approaches to the organisation and delivery of practice placements were being designed. The purpose of any new approach was to increase the quantity and quality of practice learning opportunities and improve the experience of involvement by all stakeholders in the future. For students, any increase in the quantity of practice placements on offer to the University would in effect reduce the number of individual students experiencing a delayed start to a placement experience and therefore eliminate the likelihood of the associated negative consequences on their personal lives.

The Robert Gordon University students had played a significant part in the outcomes of the LEEP Project and in this study they reported on their experiences of the personal impact of a delayed start to practice placement that was a direct result of insufficient practice opportunities.

## The study

The students invited to participate in the survey were those from the full range of social work programmes offered by the University who had completed a practice placement between January and March 2004 (academic session 2003-2004). The aim was to quantify the number of students who had experienced a delay to the start of their practice placement and gather information on the personal consequences experienced as a direct result of the delay, if any.

Students eligible to participate in the survey (164 in number) were invited to complete a postal questionnaire.

The surveyed period, January to March, was identified as a period which had in the past generated a higher number of late starts for students due to a high demand for placement opportunities, therefore potentially yielding the most useful findings in terms of gathering a wide representation of students' experiences.

The questionnaire was returned by 72 students; a 44% response rate which is acceptable for a postal survey according to Neuman (1994).

Of respondents 66% were full time students, 19% were generic distance learning students, and 15% came from the residential childcare pathway.

The majority of the full time students had undertaken a final practice learning experience during the surveyed period (91%) which may have resulted in this group feeling they had more to offer the outcome of the survey given they had more experience of the organisation and delivery of practice placements.

The response rate from generic distance learning students may be explained by the fact that this social work programme rarely experience delays to the start of their practice learning experiences due to prior placement arrangements with students' employers. The responses received from students undertaking the residential childcare pathway was seen to be influenced by this group having completed their professional training some months prior to receiving the questionnaire and the University's existing links with service providers due to the specialist nature of the course.

## Findings

### The students' experience

The survey highlighted that 37 students (51%) started their practice placements either earlier than scheduled or on time. 35 students (49% of respondents) reported a late start to their practice placement.

The average delay reported by the student group was 51 days. Distance learning and residential childcare pathway students were less likely to experience a delay than students on the full time undergraduate or post graduate programmes.

Closer analysis of the 35 students who reported a delay to the start of their practice placement revealed that 11 of these students believed the late start was acceptable due to reasons such as personal requests for a later start date, or the result of additional negotiations undertaken for Socrates European placements. The remaining 24 students, 33% of the total number who responded to the survey, were dissatisfied with the delay to the start in their practice placement.

The students who had direct experience of a delayed start to the practice placement reported experiencing a range of negative personal consequences as a result. The most common consequences experienced were: financial (23) such as difficulty paying for accommodation or additional child care costs; personal (24) such as the cancellation of family holidays and personal stress; or employment-related (24) such as inconvenience to employer, a need to use annual leave to cover additional unplanned time away from the place of work and an inability to take on part time seasonal employment. Frequently these key areas overlapped for students, for example, not being able to work prior to a practice placement because of short notice of a start date often led to financial hardship.

### Lessons learned

The survey indicates that the number of students experiencing an unacceptable late start to their practice placement in the North of Scotland during academic session 2003-2004 (33% of respondents) was

higher than that reported by PriceWaterhouseCoopers' survey (2002) across Scotland in academic session 2001-2002 (25%). These findings were particularly relevant for full time students rather than distance learning students due to a commitment from employers to provide placement opportunities for staff/students who are undertaking distance learning or service specific programmes of study.

This possible rise reflects the continuing difficulties experienced by universities in engaging social work agencies and staff in the education and training of future professional social workers. The outcome of the study also confirmed the need for universities and social work agencies to work together to design and implement new approaches to the organisation and delivery of practice placements that takes account of the known historical problems associated with an insufficient supply of practice placements.

The survey highlights that strong links between the university and social work agencies lead to fewer problems being experienced around the sufficiency of placement opportunities, a view supported by the LEEP Project. (Bruce et al., 2005) It may be argued that those social work employers and senior managers who are making a commitment to practice placements have recognised the link between student placements and staff recruitment, ensuring they can comply with registration and quality assurance policy and procedures as required by The Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. Universities and social work agencies can give many examples, albeit anecdotal, of students who are successfully employed in the agency where they undertook their final placement. Employers may also recognise the potential for a wide range of professional development opportunities for those employees who are involved in the teaching and learning of social work students, and the role these students play in the development of an agency's learning culture. (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2006)

The survey did however remind us that, on occasions, delays to the start of a placement are arranged to meet the student's needs and do not always have negative consequences; on the contrary to create a system that has no room for flexibility would be detrimental to some students.

The survey also provided recommendations for future practice to enhance the students' experience of the organisation and delivery of practice placements. These recommendations focused on areas such as communication, procedures and finance:

- Develop further written information that clearly describes the placement allocation system for students, to be given at relevant stages in their professional training, for example during the admission process, during the course induction and during each placement preparation input.
- Develop new placement procedures that take account of students' need to work, for example optional start date two weeks after confirmed offer from agency.
- Improve communication between students, placement coordinators and personal tutors, for example the use of university student email accounts, particularly over holiday periods that occur prior to scheduled placement start dates.
- Develop a financial system that provides students with regular and prompt travel and subsistence payments.

## **Developing a new approach**

Having confirmed earlier findings of the negative personal consequences experience by students as a result of a delayed start to practice placements (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2002; Scottish Social Services Council, 2003) a new approach to the organisation and delivery of practice placements was implemented at The Robert Gordon University to ensure a more positive experience for students by working to eliminate practice placement delays as far as possible, unless they were previously negotiated and agreed by all parties.

Delays to the start of practice placements usually resulted from there being an insufficient number of practice learning opportunities to meet demand; so by addressing the problems associated with a lack of sufficient placement offers delayed starts to placements could also be addressed.

During academic session September 2005 to August 2006 a number of changes were made to the organisation and delivery of practice placements at the University. These changes were informed by the lessons learned from the student survey and included the implementation of the recommendations made by students.

A more detailed account of the process of practice placements

was included during the admission process and in the initial course induction programmes and this was followed up by specific operational information being provided prior to each practice placement experience. More detailed written information has also been designed to inform students of the matching process, providing a transparent overview of the systems but also outlining the limitations of matching, for example a match will be made that fulfils learning needs not areas of interest for employment.

A commitment was made to students that personal tutors would negotiate a start date with agency settings that would enable a student to have a two week notice period to take account of temporary work commitments, as long as this did not negatively impact on the academic assessment process.

Students are advised to make full use of their University email accounts to check for regular updates on progress and are asked to ensure their personal tutors have up to date contact telephone numbers for them to assist communication.

The University has employed staff who are dedicated to the organisation of practice placements, including an administrator who has responsibility for managing the financial systems such as student expenses and subsistence. Arrangements were made for students to make expense claims weekly rather than post placement in situations where a student would have otherwise experienced financial hardship.

To monitor the impact of the above changes to practice and to facilitate ongoing feedback on the students' experience of the organisation and delivery of the practice placements, a new evaluation system was introduced which consisted of a post placement questionnaire to be completed by all students, with the data collected, analysed and reviewed by course teams.

The new approach was also informed by the evidence provided by the LEEP Project which argued that 'An Integrated Approach' (Bruce et al., 2005) would provide a solution to the problems associated with an insufficient supply of agency practice learning opportunities. The overarching principle of this new approach was that collaboration between all practice learning stakeholders in students' learning and assessment was the way forward as it removed the burden of responsibility from individuals to one that was shared across all levels.

This involves a new approach to the practice teacher, teams, tutors and



service users and carers' roles in practice learning, creating a supervision model and coordinating packages of learning opportunities. (Bruce et al., 2005)

The 'Integrated Approach' developed by the LEEP Project consists of six key elements:

- To create opportunities for *interchangeable roles* between higher education institutions and agency staff with facilitators having a teaching role in the university and academic tutors linking with student groups and staff in agencies
- To develop the *role of practice learning facilitator* (PLF) as a manager and coordinator of packages of learning opportunities as well as having a key role in the teaching and assessment of students.
- To develop service specific & cross sector *packages of learning opportunities*.
- To develop a *team approach* to student learning and assessment by engaging a *range of staff* who supervise or coach discrete pieces of work with students
- To implement a *group and individual pattern* of student supervision.
- To ensure *service user and carer involvement* in student assessment.

These key elements have been applied to the design and delivery of the degree programmes offered at the University by:

- Involving a wide range of social work agency staff, service users and carers in the direct teaching of students. Academic staff have provided a wide range of continuing professional development input for agency staff, including a range of workshops directly related to practice learning. Academic staff have also taken on the practice learning facilitator (practice teacher or practice educator) role in agencies where staff were not in a position to do so but still wished to have students in their settings.
- Practice learning facilitators and practice teachers have worked with a range of agency staff to identify and co-ordinate a range of learning opportunities for groups of students, drawing from the wider service offered rather than only from one discrete setting. Groups of students were then matched to the service.

- Practice learning facilitators and practice teachers have engaged with a wide range of agency staff who take on the role of link supervisor to individual students, who then mentor, coach, supervise or assess students undertaking specific occupational tasks. This provides students with a range and depth of learning experiences whilst sharing the responsibility of students within teams.
- Implementing a new model of supervision that offers students a combination of individual and group supervision, usually in groups of six to eight, and brings students together from service specific settings e.g. childcare, older people, mental health.
- Practice learning facilitators and practice teachers ensure that feedback is sought from all service user and carers (where relevant) which will be used as part of the overall evidence gathering process for the final assessment outcome.

One of the other significant key findings of the LEEP Project was that senior manager involvement in practice learning would increase the quantity of agency based practice learning opportunities. (Bruce et al., 2005) Two Scottish Executive developments provided the opportunity for senior managers from both the University and social work agencies to become involved in the organisation of practice placements. The Scottish Executive (2004) had suggested that higher education institutions should contract with social work service providers to secure an 'adequate number of practice learning opportunities' to meet their demand. In addition, new arrangements for the funding of practice learning were also being implemented where universities are to become responsible for paying service providers for each practice learning experience offered. (Scottish Executive, 2004) The universities would receive this funding from the Scottish Social Services Council who would also have monitoring and auditing responsibilities.

Drawing on development work undertaken by the Scottish Practice Learning Project (2004) the University, in collaboration with key agency partners, implemented service level agreements with a wide range of voluntary, independent and statutory service providers. This process successfully engaged University and agency senior managers in a dialogue concerning the supply of practice placement offers and the University's requirements resulting in agreements being reached on the number of practice placement offers being made by each agency and the secure funding this would bring for their agency from the University.

Social work agencies were then in a position to recruit members of staff who could be assigned to practice learning, for example as full time practice learning facilitators and practice teachers. A wide range of new service providers in the voluntary and independent sectors were also recruited which has increased the range and number of learning opportunities available for students.

## **Progress to date**

Having made these adjustments to the organisation and delivery of practice placements, the University's newly developed evaluation system was used to determine the effectiveness and impact on students' experience.

The new evaluation process was first implemented in April 2006 with a group of second year, undergraduate, full time students on return from their practice placement experience. This practice placement period was January to March, the same period as the focus for the original survey.

Forty eight students took part in this initial evaluation process, all completing a questionnaire. The evaluation reported that 100% of students had practice placements identified on schedule; 79% of the group were aware of the placement allocation system and 81% believed the system of allocation was 'fair'.

Further follow up of University databases at the end of the academic year indicate that 426 students were successfully placed in agencies during this academic session, 2005-2006, the majority of them in the North East of Scotland. During this time no student experienced an unscheduled delay to the start of their practice placement.

In academic session 2006-2007 the evaluation system was implemented, post practice placement, with the full time, undergraduate group, involving 175 students. Responses were received from 102 students, 58% of the sample student group. The findings from this evaluation indicated that 100% of the respondents had practice placements identified on schedule, 94% were aware of the placement allocation system and 86% believed the system of allocation was 'fair'. A total of 403 students were successfully placed in agencies during this academic session.

The full time, undergraduate student group again provided the

most recent data collected for academic session 2007-2008, involving 170 students. Responses were received from 111 students, 65% of the sample. These responses reported that 98% of this group of students had practice placements identified on schedule, 96% were aware of the placement allocation system and 90% believed the system of allocation was 'fair'. A total of 380 students were successfully placed in agencies during this academic session.

## Conclusion

Evidence provided by the research outcomes of the LEEP Project, collaboration with agency partners and student's responses to this survey has provided the University with a sound base on which to make informed changes to the way practice placements are organised and delivered.

By adopting the 'integrated approach' (Bruce et al., 2005) to practice learning, initiating service level agreements and improving communication and support to students and agency staff involved in practice learning The Robert Gordon University has addressed the problems previously associated with a shortfall in practice placements and therefore made positive steps to improve the student's experience. Many of the negative personal consequences previously experienced by students have been eliminated and ongoing monitoring systems are in place to ensure students have an ongoing part to play in the evaluation of this critical aspect of their professional training.

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